



INTO THE BLUE

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On a spa vacation to Iceland, our editor achieves one of her travel dreams: soaking in the famed Blue Lagoon.

BY AMY CASSELL



From left: A row of rooms at the Blue Lagoon Clinic; bathers taking to the waters; the charming capital city of Reykjavik.

Iceland has always been at the top of my travel wishlist — its dramatic landscapes and snowcapped volcanoes give me a serious case of wanderlust. But it was the otherworldly Blue Lagoon that I really had my sights set on, a man-made wonder that seems too awe-gapingly beautiful in photos to be true. Dug in 1976 after the formation of a geothermal power plant, it was soon realized that the silica, mineral and algae found in the water — a mix of fresh water and seawater sourced from 6,500 feet below — noticeably improved the skin of people who suffered from psoriasis. The lagoon opened to the public in the mid-1980s, and more beauty benefits were quickly discovered: The mineral makeup of the water heals skin inflammation, reduces UV damage and stimulates collagen production on top of simply being a surreal, stress-relieving experience. Combine all of that plus the news that *Lonely Planet* named the country its “Reader’s Choice: Best in Travel” for 2012 and I decided it was finally the perfect time to go and take to the waters myself. While most people start their visit in the coastal capital city of Reykjavik, I wanted to head straight to the lagoon. So after landing at Keflavik International Airport in the wee hours of a frigid November morning, I drove 20 minutes to the town of **Grindavik**. I couldn’t see much at this hour — and wouldn’t be able to for several more (like Alaska and other extreme northern spots, winter in Iceland is marked by limited hours of daylight). I took a quick nap in my room at the **Blue Lagoon Clinic**, the spa’s 15-room hotel. Used mainly by guests receiving multiday psoriasis treatments, these simple, modern accommodations have direct access to the Clinic’s private lagoon.

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Awake and excited later that morning, I felt like I was traversing a foreign planet as I navigated rocky paths cut through the middle of hardened lava fields on my five-minute walk to the main lagoon. All I could see were lava fields — hundreds of yards of hardened black chunks covered in a thin layer of bright green moss. “That moss has taken more than 100 years to grow,” my guide said. “We don’t let anyone disturb it.” Turning a corner and catching a glimpse of the lagoon for the first time, I felt like I had been dumped into the middle of a Photoshopped image, the clear blue water stark against the backdrop of the somber gray sky. Before hitting the waters, I met with Asa Brynjolfsdottir, the director of research and development at the Blue Lagoon, who showed me around the complex and told me about the line of beauty products sourced from the lagoon. The products were first launched in 1995, mainly to cater to patients coming to the lagoon for psoriasis treatment. After further research, the line expanded to introduce spa products in 1997, growing to include a lineup of more than 50 products today. Brynjolfsdottir is perfect proof of just how effective the products are — her complexion is stunning and flawless. As I sat across from her at a large table, smelling and sampling several of the products, she explained how water from the lagoon is harvested at a production plant on-site, where she and her staff work to extract the beneficial silica, minerals and algae to create everything from face masks to hydrating serums. Finally it was time to try the lagoon. Stepping into it was like entering the world’s largest hot tub; I instantly felt calm as my toes sunk into the

smooth, white silica mud at the bottom. The freezing wind and a slight drizzle of rain pelted my face, but my entire body, submerged in 100-degree waters, was warm enough for me to not be bothered by it. “Be sure to use some of the silica mud on your face,” I remembered Brynjolfsdottir telling me, so I grabbed a handful of the mud from the bottom and slathered it across my face and décolletage, letting the mixture dry and the minerals do their work. After a few blissful moments of bobbing silently, I waded over to the corner of the lagoon, where my therapist was waiting to take me to my in-water spa treatment. The spa offers a full menu of treatments indoors, but the ultimate takes place in the lagoon itself. The Silica Salt Glow & Massage (60 minutes, \$162) started with a body scrub and ended with a watsu-style massage, performed

as I floated peacefully in the lagoon, watching the sky turn from gray to black. On my way out of town, I spent a night in **Reykjavik**. This seaside city reminded me of a fisherman’s village, with its peaked-roof buildings and hilly cobblestone streets. But first impressions can be deceiving: Inside these quaint structures were beautiful stores, art collectives curated by local designers, cozy coffee shops and restaurants serving sophisticated cuisine. Walking the well-lit streets that evening, I was amazed that the serene place I had just soaked away my worries in the day before was actually the source of power for all of the lights illuminating my night. As isolated as Iceland may seem to some, a place that has managed to create a piece of beauty that both powers a city and calms your soul is surely doing something right.

TIPS FOR TAKING TO THE WATER

- › If you’re traveling with a large group, splurge for the exclusive lounge, a private area of the Blue Lagoon Geothermal Spa with private changing rooms, personal attendants, a fireplace and refreshments. There is direct indoor access to the lagoon, so you can disrobe indoors and avoid the harsh blast of cold air outside.
- › The silica that does wonders for your skin also dries out your hair. Slather a layer of conditioner in your hair before you enter the lagoon, then condition again after you’re finished.
- › Go right when the lagoon opens (9 a.m. or 10 a.m., depending on the time of year) to avoid the crowds. The lagoon sees up to 400,000 visitors annually, so you’ll want to beat the tour buses.
- › Pick up some Blue Lagoon skin-care products at the gift shop in the main complex. Our pick: their brand-new Silica Mud Exfoliator (5.1 ounces, \$40), a combo of Blue Lagoon seawater and silica that smoothes and firms the face. All of the products are also available online at bluelagoon.com/shop.

OPPOSITE FROM LEFT: ROBERT HARDING PICTURE LIBRARY/ALAMY; ALESSANDRO GRUSSU/GETTY IMAGES